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ABSTRACT

A description is given of a writing lab in which teacher education students from a content area reading class helped English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners improve their writing. The activity employed an instructional technique called "reformulation." First, each ESL student wrote a relatively short essay (300-400 words) on a selected topic. Next, a copy of each essay was given to a native speaking student teacher who "reformulated" it, i.e., re-wrote it without altering the content, yet changed it from beginning to end to sound as native-like as possible. Third, each ESL student worked together with the native speaker comparing the reformulated version with the original and produced a final version of the essay. A verbatim example of a segment of an original essay, its reformultion, and re-write is provided. (JD)

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A CONTENT AREA WRITING LAB FOR PRESERVICE TEACHERS AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Summary: Selecting appropriate methods for teaching preservice teachers how to provide content area writing instruction requires the identification of the concepts students need to learn as well as the provision of a "hands-on" experience. An activity, devised and implemented by the authors, which addresses both these concerns is a writing lab in which teacher education students from a content area reading class help English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners improve their writing.

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A Content Area Writing Lab for Preservice Teachers and Second Language Learners

The need for content areas teachers to assume more responsibility for developing and extending student writing ability has been recently underscored (6, 7). The increased emphasis on providing more and better writing activities in the subject areas is justified for three reasons: (a) reading comprehension can be improved through writing activities (4); (b) writing assists students in mastering course content (1); and (c) each content area has unique writing requirements including appropriate formats, correct word choice, and spelling of technical words (8).

It is hoped that this increased attention given to the importance of content area writing won't be lost on teacher educators. In teacher training programs where writing is not presently taught as a powerful instructional technique (and I suspect that describes the majority), a logical place for its inclusion in the curriculum exists--the content area reading class. The logic is this: the foundations of content reading instruction--knowledge about language, experience, and schemata and how to implement this knowledge through teaching techniques--also provides a sound base for the teaching of writing.

Where commitment to teach content writing can be generated, the next concern is "how to." Selecting appropriate methods requires attention to identifying functional concepts about writing and instruction which preservice teachers should learn as well as the provision of a "hands-on" experience to apply these concepts. An activity, devised and implemented by the authors, which addresses both methodological concerns is a writing lab in which teacher education students from a content area reading class help English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners improve their writing.

Reformulation

The writing lab activity we devised employs an instructional technique called "reformulation" (3), which has three essential phases. First, each ESL student writes a relatively short essay (300-400 words) on a selected topic. Next, a copy of each essay is given to a native speaker who "reformulates" it, i.e., re-writes it without altering the content, yet changes it from beginning to end to sound as native-like as possible. Third, each ESL student works together with the native speaker comparing the reformulated version with the original.

We chose reformulation as the basis for the writing lab because it illustrates several concepts about writing, supported by research, which can be applied by content teachers. One concept is that the revision process is critical in improving writing (2). Content teachers who know the value of revision can incorporate re-writes into typical content writing assignments such as reports, essays, and summaries. Another concept is that peer evaluation and editing is effective in improving writing skills (9). This is a critical concept for content teachers because it answers the real and practical question: How could I plan lessons if I have to grade 100 papers every night? A third concept is that teaching should emphasize and exploit the close connection between written and oral language (5). To see how ESL students' writing relates so closely to their oral language proficiency (or lack of it) is to understand that practice and instruction in oral communication--through small group work and oral reports--can have a positive influence on students' writing.

Writing Lab

The first stage in implementing the writing lab was to arrange for the ESL students to write essays for teacher education students to reformulate. Since a majority of the students in the content area reading class were preparing to become music educators, writing topics relating to music were chosen. The topic selected by most of the ESL students was: Discuss how music affects your emotions.

After the ESL students had written their essays, copies were made and given one to each teacher education student, who was to reformulate it prior to the writing lab two days hence. On the day of the writing lab, each teacher education student was paired with the ESL student who had written the original essay from which the reformulation was made. Each pair was given these instructions:

> In this writing lab you will be comparing an original essay written by an ESL student with a re-written version by a teacher education student. Here's how to proceed:
>
> 1. Read through both essays. First, look for examples of vocabulary (words) which were changed in the re-written version. Make a note of these.
>
> 2. Read both essays again. This time look for phrases which were

changed in the re-written version. Try to explain to each other why groups of words go together in a certain way in English.

3. Re-read the essays one last time. Discuss the organization of ideas. Discuss the use of paragraphs (or lack of them). Discuss what information may have been better left out and what else should have been included.

With one last reminder to keep the original content intact and to respect each other's efforts, the pairs began their comparisons. Forty-five minutes later, at the end of the class period, all the pairs were still intensely involved in the activity. This second stage of the writing lab concluded with our collecting of the copies of the originals and the reformulations which the pairs had used for comparison. This was done to see what the ESL students, who would re-write their original essay in a class the following week, had learned from the activity.

Feedback

The third stage of the writing lab was to generate reflection and elicit feedback. Reflecting on a teaching activity just completed is an exercise practiced frequently in teacher education which has value for the teacher education student as well as the teacher educator. The student benefits from the opportunity to analyze the dynamics of the teaching situation which led to

anticipated and unanticipated outcomes. The teacher educator gets feedback about the dynamics of the student's performance in relation to the student's previous training. With this feedback the teacher educator can plan further activities for individual teacher education students as well as assess the value of the activity just completed to see if it is worth repeating with other students.

One part of the reflection stage took place after a short break following the comparison activity. The student teachers were asked to respond in writing to questions concerning what they had worked on with the ESL students and what they had learned about teaching. This was followed by a discussion of their reactions to the activity.

The written responses of the teacher education students indicated that four writing concepts received the most attention during the comparison phase: paragraphing, "tighter writing," vocabulary, and the use of examples. Table 1 lists these concepts with two representative examples of each from the teacher education students' papers and gives the percentage of students who mentioned each concept.

Insert Table 1 about here.

The feedback from the teacher education students concerning what they had learned about teaching was also revealing. In responding to a question about insights gained into the teaching of writing, there was much agreement on several points. Nearly all the students agreed that teaching writing is difficult (although they felt that working with ESL students was easy!) and that they needed to learn much more to teach writing competently. As one student wrote, "I need to know different ways to explain the same idea and to have a good knowledge of grammar so I can use examples in different ways until it 'clicks'." Another student noted, "Writing is very hard to explain--we take what we do for granted without knowing how we do it."

Another question, which probed the teacher education students' reactions to what they had learned about teaching in general, yielded a high degree of consensus also. The value of praise and patience, separately and in tandem, were mentioned by most of the students. The need to cite many examples in process of explaining a point was again repeatedly noted. A third recurring theme was that peer teaching activities could be both fun and productive. A student wrote: "I think working in pairs is super--peers help stimulate each other and even help in correcting mistakes." Lastly, several students attested to a changed attitude toward including writing instruction as an integral part of content area teaching. As one wrote, "Grading reports won't be that bad. English and grammar aren't as bad as some English teachers make it."

The second part of the reflection and feedback took place one week after the comparison phase when the teacher education students were given the ESL

students' re-written essays. Much progress was noted as the students found much evidence demonstrating that the writing concepts they had taught had been applied by the ESL students. Below is a verbatim example of a segment of an original essay, its reformulation, and re-write.

Original: Yes, the music affect my moods. I usually change my feeling where I am listening to music. I have the habit of listen to music all the days as much hours as I can. The music has been become in a essencial part of my life. I do my homework, cook, clean the house, do exercises, etc. listening to music.

Reformulation: Music affects my moods. My feelings usually change when I listen to music. I like to listen to music every day as much as possible. I do homework, cook, clean house, exercise and accomplish other tasks while listening to music.

Re-write: Music affects my moods. I usually change my moods when I listen to music. When I am sad or angry I begin to listen to music, thus, I feel better in a few minutes. I like fast music, such as rock-and-roll, new wave, Venezuelan music and others.

I like to work while listening to music. Music makes me feel good when I do my homework or housework. When I

> go to the college library, in order to do my homework, I usually carry a couple of tapes. So I listen to music while doing it.

Conclusion

Because the writing lab activity was an intensive, "hands-on" teaching experience which generated clearly evident writing improvement by the students, the preservice teachers gained interest, competency, and confidence in using writing as an instructional tool as well as greater confidence in themselves as teachers. Such beneficial outcomes would probably been impossible to achieve in field experience classrooms in secondary schools, where writing as a method to help students understand course content is an activity rarely, if ever, employed (6). By using activities such as the one described in this article, teacher educators can promote improvement in future content area writing instruction.

Table 1

Writing Concepts Taught by Teacher Education Students to ESL Students

Concept	Examples	Percentage of Students Teaching This Concept
Paragraphing	"Sentences were rearranged so that a paragraph contained one basic thought." "How to fit sentences into paragraphs."	73%
"Tighter writing"	"We worked on getting rid of excess words." "Many of his sentences could be condensed, so we eliminated a lot of unnecessary sentences."	64%
Vocabulary	"'I may be go to start to cry' I reworded, 'I might start to cry.'" "'Today' instead of 'Nowaday' and 'people's lives' instead of 'man's life'."	64%
Using examples	"I explained how to expand thoughts with examples." "Specific examples made it clearer."	45%

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